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# Book Review: Of Colonists and Others

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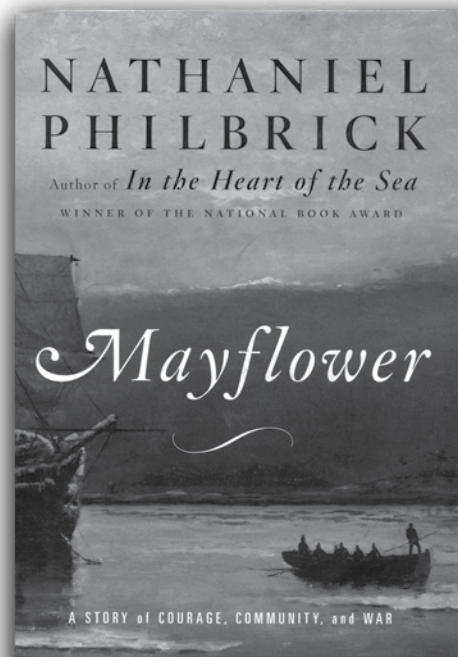
# Of Colonists and Others

Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community and War*. Viking ©2006

## Charles Angell

Except for my college and graduate school years I've lived all my life in Plymouth County. I grew up on Plympton's County Road—state route 106 on which I still live—and knew early on that it had first been an Indian trail linking the coast to the inland streams and ponds and became later the path leading from the Plimoth Plantation to the Bridgewater settlement. Later, living in Kingston, I could look out from my bedroom window and see across Kingston Bay to Plymouth Harbor and Clark's Island in the distance. I knew the history. Myles Standish was the State Forest; Jabez Corner was the end of the Plymouth to Brockton bus line; Billington Sea was large and shallow; the Jones River emptied into Kingston Bay. My summer job led me onto all the side roads of Plymouth, Bristol, and Barnstable counties. I traveled the beaches and the bogs, the dunes and drumlins, the kettlehole ponds and the scrub pine woods. I knew the place, or so I thought.

A landscape changes, sometimes imperceptibly, sometimes dramatically. Nathaniel Philbrick's *Mayflower* recounts the dramatic changes European colonists imposed on what loomed before them as a forbidding and hostile wilderness. If you sit in a skiff fishing for stripers and bluefish off Clark's Island, as I did one gorgeous afternoon this past August, and you look in on the Plymouth shoreline, blocking out the portico over the rock, the yacht club, the old Mabbet's mills buildings, the Mayflower replica, it's not all that difficult to imagine in the mind's eye how foreboding the wilderness might seem to strangers approaching the coast. Yet, it wasn't. We now know that a well-organized and flourishing native American population had long inhabited the area, their numbers reduced by influenza contracted from Europeans fishing along the coast, a grim foreshadowing of their relations with the colonists. Thus, the crew and passengers of the Mayflower encountered no resistance and were able, as one of their initial acts upon coming ashore at Orleans' First Encounter Beach, to frighten off some Indians and steal the corn buried at an abandoned Indian village. They promised themselves they would restore what they had taken, despite having scant idea how to do so until the Indians showed them how to plant, fertilize, and cultivate it.



To their credit, as Philbrick tells us, the colonists maintained by and large friendly relations with the Indians for over three decades. They traded. The Indians had a taste for European goods though not for European customs. The Plymouth colonists respected Indian lands though they never fully understood that the swamps were sacred ground as well as refuges. The colonists tried to treat Indian transgressions—drunkenness, theft, occasional violence—in a just and equitable manner. Above all, they tried to convert the Indians to Christianity. One might be forgiven for thinking that Bradford, Howland, Winslow and their colleagues had read Michel de Montaigne's essay "On Cannibals" and taken to heart his lesson that the Europeans could be as savage and barbaric in their practices as the autochthonous South American "cannibals" Montaigne used as his examples. The arrival in 1630 of the Puritans to what became the Massachusetts Bay Colony led to tensions and resentments not only between the two colonies but between the colonists and the Indians. Philbrick's narrative, its early chapters recounting a familiar story, begins in its later chapters to make strange this well traveled landscape as an inevitable clash of cultures develops.

Imagine yourself an Indian caught up in the colonists' judicial proceedings. Imagine yourself an Indian suddenly confronted by a colonist wanting to purchase

your land, something you'd never before considered a commodity. (Massasoit sold the land which now comprises Bridgewater for "seven coats, nine hatchets, eight hoes, twenty-nine knives, four moose skins, and ten and a half yards of cotton.") Imagine yourself an Indian dealing with men whose principal interest was converting you to Christianity. Thomas Morton, the infamous Morton of Merrymount of Hawthorne's story, perceived the Indian side of the situation and sympathized with it, bringing upon himself the ire of the Puritan authorities. So, too, did Roger Williams whom the Bay Colony and subsequently the Plimoth Plantation cast out in part for his tolerant attitude towards the Indians, particularly for his insistence that the Indians were the legal possessors of the land and should receive just compensation for it.

As the original generation of colonists gave way to their descendants and as the Bay Colony gained influence, relations with the Indians grew harsher. "It was only a matter of time," Philbrick writes, "before Massachusetts Bay's economic ambitions brought the Puritans into conflict with the region's other occupants, the Native Americans." The Pequot War of 1637 arose out of these conflicts and brought European battlefield tactics—many of the colonial soldiers were veterans of Europe's Thirty Years War—to bear against the Pequots. The colonists assaulted a Pequot stronghold on the Mystic River, set it ablaze and either immolated the inhabitants outright or slaughtered those attempting to flee the blaze. Some 400 Pequots—men, women, and children—perished by fire and sword. "With the Pequot War," Philbrick remarks, "New England was introduced to the horrors of European-style genocide."

What we today know as the King Philip's War of 1675–76 spread the horrors throughout eastern Massachusetts, much of Rhode Island, and reached even as far as the Connecticut River Valley and southern New Hampshire. Philbrick devotes more than 100 pages of *Mayflower* to the conflict and reveals how colonists and Indians embroiled themselves in what became a fight to the death. For the native inhabitants, the colonists' encroachment on their lands and the Indians' increasing awareness of what had become unscrupulous exploitation triggered the war. For the colonists who believed that by negotiating treaties with the Indians, they had in effect made the natives subjects of the colonies, any Indians who violated the treaties had to the colonists' way of thinking committed treason. Philbrick's account of the increasing and intensifying violence which devolved into savagery on both sides and ultimately to atrocities calls to mind Thucydides' classic account of Athenians fighting Spartans where,

as the hostilities prolonged themselves, the Athenians to eliminate any perceived threat turned against the innocent—most notably the Melians—and slaughtered them. Atrocity led to atrocity; by war's end, Philbrick tells us, the Plimoth colony had lost eight percent of its male population while the native population of southern New England had been reduced by "somewhere between 60 and 80 percent." Of those natives who survived, many were rounded up and sold as slaves to Caribbean plantation owners. King Philip's War gave the colonists near total hegemony over the region and fostered antagonisms toward the Indians that accompanied settlers as they expanded westward. The war produced in Benjamin Church America's first Indian fighter who adopted and adapted the Indian methods of warfare in order to defeat them. Church used as well as opposed the native Americans and stands as the prototype of the frontiersman, a figure history finds simultaneously appealing and appalling.

The earliest Angell ancestor, Thomas, journeyed to Providence with Roger Williams as an indentured servant. Finishing Philbrick's *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War*, I'd like to think my ancient progenitor shared Williams' tolerant and enlightened views. Whether he did or no, Philbrick demonstrates in his detailed account of this clash of cultures how easily and how quickly inflamed passions and fear overwhelm tolerance and good intentions. For those of us who inhabit and love Plymouth, Bristol, and Barnstable counties Philbrick refreshes for us the memory that we tread on mystical, magical, and bloodied ground.

—Charles Angell is Professor of English and  
Book Review Editor of the Bridgewater Review.